

Caroline Bithell. 2007. *Transported by Song: Corsican Voices from Oral Tradition to World Stage*. *Europea: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities*, no. 5. Lanham, MD, and Oxford: Scarecrow Press.

### Reviewed by Ruth Emily Rosenberg

This is the fifth book in an excellent series from Scarecrow Press entitled *Europea: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities*, edited by Philip V. Bohlman and Martin Stokes. The Mediterranean island of Corsica yields a particularly rich case study for this series, which seeks in part to investigate the trajectories of traditional musics in a “postnational” Europe. Caroline Bithell’s sophisticated and sensitive study of Corsican musical life since the late twentieth century tells a story about a culture continually renegotiating its relationship to modernity, to the rest of Europe, and to the world. Bithell, a lecturer in ethnomusicology and arts administration at the University of Manchester, draws on over a decade of fieldwork to produce a book of historical depth and ethnographic rigor. Her analyses of ever-evolving musical practices offer insights into the contested site of “the traditional” not just in Corsica, but all over the globe.

The island of Corsica is a region of France comprising two *départements*: Haute-Corse and Corse-du-Sud. Its modest population of 260,000 lives in the least industrialized region of France, which, thanks to its beautiful beaches and proximity to the continent, nonetheless attracts over two million visitors a year. With majestic granite peaks earning it the appellation “la montagne dans la mer,” Corsica has beguiled outsiders since antiquity. Its history is rife with wars and invasions, but the island’s inhabitants have always persisted in asserting a distinct Corsican identity. In the mid-1700s the Corsicans made a vigorous bid for independence from their Genoese rulers, only to ultimately lose their autonomy to France. In the twentieth century, Corsica was hit hard by the world wars, resulting in severe depopulation and the loss of the island’s traditional agro-pastoral economy. Discontented islanders mobilized in the 1970s to protest their neglect by the French government. An autonomist movement was born of this new political consciousness, and a renewed sense of cultural pride spurred a revival of the island’s indigenous language and culture.

The Swiss ethnomusicologist Wolfgang Laade was the first to publish a monograph about Corsican traditional music, drawing on material he collected during the 1950s and 1970s. In traditional Corsican society music was predominately vocal, and singing and improvising verses were wide-

spread activities. A variety of monodic song types, including laments and sung dialogues, accompanied the pastoral and domestic duties of men and women. Women improvised laments for the dead and lullabies for infants; men sang secular polyphonic songs for sheep-shearing parties, hunting, or seasonal celebrations. However, by the mid-twentieth century, the rural way of life to which such songs were integral was becoming obsolete. When Laade left Corsica in 1973, he had little hope that Corsican song would survive this period of rapid modernization. And indeed, most of Corsica's musical patrimony might well have disappeared as the population aged, had it not been for a group of politically engaged "militants culturels" (cultural militants) and musicians who became active in Corsica during the late 1960s and 1970s. Their efforts to revive and reconstruct the island's secular and sacred musical traditions became, along with the preservation of the Corsican language, a central agenda of the cultural and political movement known as the *riacquistu* (or "reacquisition," for which this period was named). Since then, vocal polyphony—especially the secular *paghjella* genre—has become a politicized icon of the island's unique cultural identity. Performed alongside overtly political *chansons* at nationalist events, polyphonic songs have been framed as the most profound—and profoundly local—expression of Corsica's cultural heritage.

With *Transported by Song*, Bithell has written a chapter of Corsica's musical history that Laade could not have anticipated in the early 1970s. Her emphasis is on the surprisingly vibrant Corsican music scene of the 1990s—a scene that is the direct legacy of the *riacquistu*. Over the course of ten years, Bithell observed the activities of Corsican artists dedicated to sustaining and evolving Corsica's musical heritage. For the majority of them, singing traditional polyphony is not just an expression of unity and solidarity, but also, Bithell argues, a way of articulating their distance from "a modern, middle class, French aesthetic" (156). While these groups were very active at the local level during the 1990s—performing at festivals, singing at funerals and weddings, and instructing younger singers in their art—they also benefited from a burgeoning world music market eager for distinctive regional sounds. Corsica's polyphonic singing, with its "forced," nasal timbre, free rhythm, and melismatic style, soon found its way into more cosmopolitan contexts. (You may have heard Corsican sacred polyphony on recordings by Marcel Pérès's Ensemble Organum or remember the all-female polyphony group from Corsica that opened the 1992 Winter Olympics.) The book's subtitle, "Corsican Voices from Oral Tradition to World Stage," might imply that Corsican vocal music has made a one-way trip from the craggy cradle of Corsica to the cosmopolitan and commercial world music

arena. But Bithell suggests that Corsican artists have sought to balance tradition and modernity, the local and the cosmopolitan. By assessing the impact of collective memory, individual creativity, and cultural policy on the island's musical life, Bithell's study seeks to uncover the ways in which the cosmopolitan performance and recording culture might be able to coexist alongside the local musical practices of Corsica's oral tradition.

The first of the book's three sections comprises three chapters, which provide a thorough introduction to traditional Corsican society and its musical heritage. Because the major studies of Corsican music have previously only appeared in German and French, this is a welcome English-language exposition of its characteristic features. Bithell discusses several genres of monodic songs (laments, election songs, threshing songs, etc.), but focuses especially on polyphonic genres. Scholars of other European "folk" polyphony traditions will find this discussion particularly interesting. Detailed but not excessively encyclopedic, the context provided here is relevant to understanding the conclusions Bithell draws about Corsica's contemporary music scene in later chapters. For example, chapter 2 introduces specific songs of the oral tradition that are often reinterpreted by contemporary groups, and the discussion of the Corsican "sound" in the following chapter centers on technical aspects of the *paghjella* genre, which occupies an important place in both the oral tradition and the contemporary scene.

Chapter 3, in which Bithell considers the transcendental and metaphysical dimensions of singing polyphony, is one of the most fascinating and poetic parts of the book. Here Bithell interweaves the voices of several informants who describe the pleasure of singing, as well as its seductive and intoxicating properties. She builds upon the work of scholars like Timothy Rice, Jane Sugarman, and Gage Averill, all of whom have attended to this aspect of vocal polyphony in their work. Bithell's informants report that they experience extreme physiological, spiritual, and emotional states in the course of performance. Corsicans, however, do not traditionally conceive of singing *paghjella* as "performance"—a point which is significant in shaping their aesthetic experience. Corsican singers speak of "making" a *paghjella* rather than composing it, and describe the *paghjella* as an activity carried out mainly for the benefit and pleasure of the singers themselves, not an audience. In a *paghjella équipe*—a trio of close friends or relatives who sing together regularly—the singers typically stand in a tight circle, leaning into or onto one another, concentrating intensely on timing their entrances and blending their voices. The aim is not technical perfection but a collective experience of bliss that singers describe as something like being transported by song. Bithell's informants describe the altered state brought

## Current Musicology

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about by song with an eloquence that visitors to the island, both ancient and modern, have often admired among the Corsicans. She quotes a singer named Ghjiseppu Turchini:

And then there are evenings when you feel good, evenings when the wine is good, evenings when you are in good form, evenings when the climate is good, the smells are magnificent, the setting is extraordinary—there are evenings like that, or mornings, or masses, when you truly touch the inexpressible, the highest and most noble things of human experience . . . Because music . . . is part of the intimate architecture of the world, when you not only admire it but in addition you have the privilege of practicing it, you feel like a demi-urge, someone who not only partakes of this creation but . . . participates *in* this creation. (73)

While Bithell argues that the transcendental state described by Corsican singers is a collective phenomenon that entails more than a shared musical aesthetic, she also investigates the details of the musical grammar internalized by Corsica's best *paghjella équipes*. Aided by recordings made at "singing schools" and workshops designed to instruct non-Corsican singers in the indigenous aesthetic, the author culls the main musical concerns of *paghjella* singers. These include the execution of *rivuccate*, a term describing a variety of melismatic gestures, and the pacing and balance of melismatic and sustained passages. The book's discussion of the pedagogical language employed by singing teachers helps the reader appreciate the complex rhythmic and timbral aspects of the Corsican aesthetic.

The second part of the book turns to historical matters, showing how the economic and sociopolitical climate following World War I impacted Corsica's musical traditions, gave rise to new styles, and eventually lead to the politically charged revival of the late 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 4 begins this second part by describing the rapid decline of traditional musical practices and the emergence of French-influenced *chanteurs de charme* in the early twentieth century. Following the war, many islanders left Corsica to pursue careers and opportunities on the continent, the Americas, or in the colonies of North Africa. French, the official language of the island, became the language of the upwardly mobile, while the Corsican language went into decline. Traditional music followed suit; many islanders considered the old styles backwards or embarrassing. As singers grew old or emigrated, the systems of oral transmission that had guarded indigenous settings of the Latin mass broke down. Many villages lost the distinctive tradition of sacred polyphony that had been safeguarded for generations. Meanwhile, the dissemination of Western popular music led to more lyrical and nostalgic renderings of Corsican songs on record. Contemporary singers often dismiss the music of the *chanteurs de charme* of this period, such as Tino Rossi, as

corny and “inauthentic.” Nonetheless, Bithell gives extensive treatment to this style and also to the folkloric groups that adapted Corsican music in the mid-twentieth century, arguing rightly that these phenomena help us understand why singers of the 1970s went looking for “real” Corsican voices when they did.

The next chapter is dedicated to the *riacquistu*, the cultural and political movement that sought to protect and preserve the identity, language, ecology, and music of the island. Bithell describes how it was the “generation of 1970” that promoted the *paghjella*, in particular, in order to index an essential Corsican identity. Chapter 5 chronicles the formation and influence of *Canta u Populu Corsu* (The Corsican People Sing), the seminal musical group of this potent political moment. The group was founded by cultural activists and singers who wanted to reconstruct the songs of Corsica’s embattled rural population. Bithell shows how the political confrontations of the mid-1970s, which spawned Corsica’s paramilitary autonomist group, the *Front de Libération Nationale de a Corse*, also had an effect on musical production. *Canta*’s early albums contained “unadulterated performances that are not far from those featuring on field recordings” (121). After 1975, a new style of protest song called *cantu indiatu* expressed the discontentment of *chanteurs engagés* (politically engaged singers), departing in certain ways from the traditional *paghjella* in order to accommodate instrumental accompaniment and texts with a militant message. Chapter 6 explores how the *paghjella* and certain forms of sacred polyphony experienced a renaissance during the 1980s.

The book’s final section concerns musical activity in Corsica since the 1990s, focusing most keenly on contemporary polyphonic groups. In the 1970s, the interests of political autonomy and cultural survival inspired strident protest music and motivated research into archaic song forms. Once this crucial period of “reacquisition” passed, Corsican artists of the 1980s and 1990s began to engage in “debates regarding the meaning of tradition, the legitimacy of innovation, and the vexed relationship between tradition and creation” (167). The indigenous conceptions of musical creation and performance discussed in the first half of the book come back into play here. As the informants quoted in chapter 3 make apparent, improvisation, reinterpretation, and variation are central to the indigenous musical aesthetic. For example, the singers of the polyphonic *paghjella* emphasize “constructing a *paghjella* anew on the occasion of each rendition, as opposed to simply reproducing a song that is always the same” (63). Bithell points out that with principles such as improvisation and variation built into the traditional aesthetic, contemporary artists could justify moving beyond what was becoming a standardized traditional repertoire.

As part of a “determination to reinvent herself as a champion of cultural diversity,” in the 1980s France adopted a cultural policy which embraced music that sounded multicultural or “exotic” (159). Bithell argues that Corsican artists were therefore able to break into the world music industry without radically “smoothing out” the distinctive sound of their vocal music. Access to a broader range of performance and recording opportunities inspired artists of the 1980s and 1990s to focus less on the political message of their music and more on aesthetic issues. Many began to interpret the music of their oral tradition in new ways, embracing the concept of *métissage* (the French label for “world” or transnational musics) by integrating the music of other cultures, employing other languages, and amplifying their instruments. Bithell extensively documents the specific musical choices made by these groups over the years, pointing out how they have “modernized” Corsican music by experimenting with meter, instrumentation, and modality, for example (193). Alongside this musical evolution emerged a cosmopolitan political position, which adopted the rhetoric of “postmodern . . . plurality” (173) or “global harmony” (192). Chapter 7 discusses in detail the careers of several contemporary performing artists from Corsica, highlighting their musical innovations.

While the artists and recordings that Bithell examines in detail might seem a bit remote to nonspecialists, readers should not be deterred. This book makes significant contributions in more general areas as well. For those interested in other musical cultures of the Mediterranean region, for example, the Corsican case will be illuminating. Chapter 8 contributes to a body of recent work—notably *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, edited by Tullia Magrini (2003), and *Mediterranean Mosaic: Popular Music and Global Sounds*, edited by Goffredo Plastino (2003)—that focuses not only on local musical practices of the Mediterranean, but also on the “common threads, trends, the interactions among otherwise divergent traditions” of the region (xxix). Bithell notes that some Corsican artists have consciously established themselves as part of the broader Mediterranean region by exploring what they perceive to be the Oriental or Arabic roots of their own tradition. This identification can be employed strategically, she argues, in order to disassociate Corsica from the West, or it can be a means of “occupying a place that can be seen as liminal or reconciliatory” (207). Every scholar of Mediterranean music can profit from Bithell’s analysis of the identity politics at work here, as well as from her research into the European Union’s Interreg programs, which support partnerships between Mediterranean regions.

Gender is also a key aspect of this book. Traditionally, the musical spheres of men and women in Corsica were separated; women sang mostly

laments and lullabies, while men sang polyphonic as well as monodic songs, including laments for animals and threshing songs. In the period of the *riacquistu*, Bithell argues, the association of polyphonic singing with political militancy kept women at the periphery of musical activity, with few exceptions. However, the author observes that the proliferation of singing schools since the 1980s has helped to train girls and women in polyphonic singing. Indeed, several successful all-female polyphony groups have been formed in the last ten years, a significant phenomenon that Bithell examines in detail. She argues that singing polyphony has provided a new way for women to perform their identity as Corsicans and participate in the island's musical life. This development has arguably reaped even greater rewards in the world music market. Female groups such as Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses and Donnissulana were some of the first to find international success. In turn, this success accorded them "a key role in extending the boundaries of the polyphonic tradition and securing a place for the Corsican sound in the global music marketplace" (170).

Despite the fact that many Corsican groups have gained international recognition, most continue to sing locally as well. Well-established singers often perform at fairs, funerals, or weddings and have demonstrated a deep commitment to Corsican charitable causes. Musically, Corsican artists usually retain the most typical characteristics of the indigenous sound, employing the distinctive language, intonation, timbre, and ornamentation of the island's music, even when singing new compositions. There are signs that their oral traditions have not just survived, but are expanding: some newly composed songs have been quickly taken up by younger singers along with the old chestnuts. But there are pitfalls here. Can the intimate contexts of *paghjella* performance, for example, be translated to larger, more commercial venues? Can commercial recordings and cosmopolitan performance contexts foster the same potential for transcendent musical experience?

Bithell's research demonstrates that most Corsican singers believe that "tradition" must not be a static concept or a *paghjella* fossilized museum piece. But many also have anxieties over whether commercial and professional concerns will edge out the range of musical activities that continue to persist "on the ground" in Corsica. In her epilogue, written ten years after the research for this project began, Bithell approaches the question, "What's next?" for Corsica's musical life. In some cases, the precious old traditions hang on, as in the saint's day celebration that the author describes here in detail. On the other hand, the effects of professionalization and commodification are apparent. Bithell finds that the country fairs where singers used to perfect the art of singing *paghjella* have changed; spontaneous polyphonic singing is often overshadowed by new political *chansons* and the classic

## Current Musicology

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anthems made famous by *Canta u Popolari Corsu*. Western-style dance and pop music are, inevitably, also perceived as a threat to local tradition. The book could easily have indulged in a mournful narrative of decline or a naive celebration of musical longevity here, but after ten years spent attending concerts, reading the local press, conducting historical research and, most importantly, listening to singers discuss their art, Bithell concludes that “the two poles of archaism and innovation” are in Corsica often “embodied in the same individuals” (261). The tension between tradition and modernity that has become a fundamental characteristic of Corsican identity is apparent in musical discourse and audible in the music itself, as skillfully demonstrated in this study.

### *References*

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